

Health: A Barometer of Sustainable Development

Health is a basic human need and right. Efforts to promote sustainable development during the past half century have advanced global health tremendously: life expectancy has increased, child mortality has been reduced and diseases have been checked.

But for millions around the world, basic health remains a distant dream. Persistent diseases like malaria and tuberculosis are all too common in the world's poorest countries. Women and children die from diseases that could easily be prevented with known, relatively inexpensive vaccines and technologies. Hundreds of millions of people do not have access to the health care services they want and need to plan their families.

The number of people without access to basic health has grown dramatically as the world's population has increased. So, too, have the range of health challenges. Since 1900, humans have introduced more than 100,000 previously unknown chemicals into the environment. Many are harmful to human health, but little is known about the environmental and health effects of the majority of these substances.

Human health is affected as well when natural resources are degraded, air and water are polluted and habitat destroyed. For example, the global HIV/AIDS crisis is likely to have originated in species that live in forests where people have only recently entered.

In short, global health is a barometer of sustainable development. Healthy people can create a healthy future.

The Environment and Basic Health

- Environmental conditions contribute significantly to communicable diseases, especially infectious, parasitic and respiratory diseases, which account for 20 to 25 percent of deaths worldwide.
- An estimated 1.5 billion people do not have access to potable water, and 3 billion – half the global population – lack sanitary facilities such as a sanitary latrine, covered wastewater drain or flush toilet. Diseases associated with dirty water kill between 5 and 12 million people a year, mostly women and children.¹
- Well-known and relatively inexpensive treatments could prevent about 60 percent of the global disease burden related to acute respiratory infections; 90 percent of diarrhea; 50 percent of chronic respiratory infections; and 90 percent of malaria.
- Air pollution kills three million people annually, 90 percent in developing countries. More than two-thirds of these deaths are associated with indoor air pollution, which comes chiefly from burning fuel indoors for cooking and therefore affects mostly women and girls. Such burning is also closely associated with the incidence of respiratory infections, lung disease and low-birth-weight babies.

- Cancer-causing agents like lead, mercury and cadmium are widespread in the environment from growing human consumption of heavy metals in industry, transportation (e.g., leaded gasoline) and other activities.

The Environment and Reproductive Health

- Scientists now regard certain chemicals such as PCBs, DDT, dioxins and at least 80 pesticides as “endocrine disrupters” that may interfere with normal hormone function. They may undermine intelligence, disease resistance and reproduction. As research continues, concern is also growing about their role in certain cancers, declining sperm counts, infertility among women, miscarriages, and early puberty in girls.
- Several chemicals are associated with childhood development problems, pregnancy failures and cancer in women—breast, ovarian, cervical, uterine and vaginal.
- Quality reproductive health care requires adequate supplies of clean water.
- Women’s traditional roles (gathering fuel and water) contribute to general ill-health, infection and diseases that make them much more vulnerable in pregnancy and childbirth. As natural resources are depleted, women must work ever harder to obtain the necessary materials, putting their health at greater risk.

UNFPA – Promoting Global Health

UNFPA helps developing countries, at their request, improve access to and quality of reproductive health care, particularly family

planning, safe motherhood, and prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV/AIDS. Priorities include:

- **Reproductive health and family planning** — UNFPA works for universal access to reproductive health services, including voluntary family planning, for all couples and individuals by 2015, the goal set at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development.
- **HIV/AIDS prevention** — As a UNAIDS co-sponsor, UNFPA helps people learn ways to avoid infection and obtain appropriate services; protects pregnant women against infection; and ensures condom availability for HIV/AIDS prevention.
- **Young people** — UNFPA programs help adolescents and young people obtain accurate information and non-judgmental counseling services to prevent unwanted pregnancy and STIs, including HIV/AIDS.
- **Safe motherhood** — To reduce the 500,000 preventable maternal deaths per year in developing countries, UNFPA promotes wider access to skilled delivery assistance and emergency obstetric care.
- **Reproductive health supplies** — UNFPA provides logistic support and commodities to help countries improve people’s access to affordable and high-quality methods of contraception and STI prevention, including condoms.
- **Response to emergencies** — The fund helps ensure that women displaced by natural disasters or armed conflict have life saving services available, such as assisted delivery and prenatal and post-partum care. It also works to reduce displaced women’s vulnerability to HIV infection, sexual exploitation and violence.

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